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Introduction: The First Years Out

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INTRODUCTION

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JUDITH LEIPZIG is on the faculty of the Bank Street College of Education Graduate School, where she teaches courses and mentors student teachers in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education Programs. In addition, she has developed and teaches the “New Teachers Online Forum,” an online course for Bank Street graduates in their first three years of teaching.

Once a year in the General Education Student Teaching Program at Bank Street College, we host an event for our current students at which former advisees return to talk about their first-year teaching experiences. As I read the essays in this issue, I remembered listening to one of our panelists, a fine K/1 teacher who had been working for five years in a New York City public school. She told our students,

Every day of my first year of teaching, I cried in the ladies room during lunch. It was a very hard year for me. I had a particularly difficult class. But I can tell you now that teaching is what I do, and I have no question that being a teacher is what I was meant to be. So if you’re having a really hard time in your first year of teaching, don’t give up on yourself.

The essays here reflect the voices of those in the midst of becoming the teachers they hope to be. Elizabeth Huffman uses the journals she kept during her first year to give the reader a vivid sense of that time, and she reflects on what later helped her to stay in teaching long enough to become competent and happy in the classroom. Marika Paez tells the story of how her encounter with one troubled child and her second-grade class allowed her to see what it means to work authentically, aligning her teacher self and her personal self in the classroom. Scott Moran describes the shift from his first year to his second year of teaching as he recounts his frustrations and his epiphanies. He writes that “the ethic of critical reflection, honed principally through the advisement group process and supported by thoughtful coursework,” helped him see his way past his notions of how to teach children in general, to the actual children with whom he worked that second year.

Rachel Mazor shares her journey from pre-school social studies teacher to high school English teacher, with several stops in between, and explains, “...there was some-

thing about each of these teaching experiences that...told me I was on the right track....” Finally, Nancy Gropper, a master teacher educator on the Graduate School faculty at Bank Street, sees herself and her own ongoing “becoming” in the new teachers with whom she works, as she identifies what is needed to help all teachers to flourish.

With the support of my colleagues at Bank Street, I am always thinking about teaching—how to teach, what to teach, what teaching is, who learners are, what the relationship between the teachers and learners should be. I think about it from the viewpoint of my advisees, and the new teachers with whom I work. I think about it from the viewpoint of someone who has been teaching babies and children, teachers and parents, in schools and therapeutic programs and colleges and prisons for twenty-seven years. And when I’m lucky—on the days when I’m really awake—I have a lot more in common with the new teachers in this volume than one might imagine. On those fortunate days, I remember three vital aspects of teaching that are explored in these articles.

First, teaching is about being present to what or who is before us. This requires the development of curiosity, an interest in the students’ experience. Scott Moran comes to understand that “...it may be that when teaching feels noticeably easier, you have stopped trying to delve deeper and stopped paying attention to the differences in each child and group of children.”

Most of us haul around our ideas—some thought out, others inherited—about what a teacher should be doing and feeling and making happen, and what students should be doing and feeling and producing. On top of our own preconceptions, we are often burdened with the weight of governmental or school mandates. All of this baggage tends to interfere with our ability to see what is actually happening with our students and what they need. Of course, theory and technique, carefully developed curricula, and an articulated approach to our work is essential in a thoughtful pedagogy. But the most potent teaching happens when teachers are able to set aside their ideas about their students, and respond to the *particular* children in their classrooms.

Second, teaching is about bringing our whole selves—our hearts, minds, and ethics—to the classroom. Teaching happens both through who we are and what we do. Marika Paez describes what she calls “a significant moment” in her teaching when:

I was able to stop thinking and planning how I was going to teach this or that lesson, or “use” this or that moment, and instead, to be emotionally authentic with, to truly listen to, and to put my full trust in my students.

This kind of compassionate and respectful teaching can transform a classroom. Teachers who draw on their own life experiences to make sense and to make connections invite children to do the same. When we remember to ground our classroom interactions in genuine relationships—not in arrangements created by who has more power and who has less—then deep learning and profound growth can happen.

Third, teaching rests on the development of an interdependence between students and teachers, among colleagues, between parents and professionals, and among the students, themselves. Nancy Gropper writes,

If truth be told, we know that no matter how long we have been in the profession, we continue to encounter problems and questions that are awesome and that are far better addressed in collaboration than in isolation.

In the midst of that interdependence is the recognition that we are all in this together—we are all teaching and learning from each other. In Elizabeth Huffman's article, the reader is struck by how toxic a school culture can be. She tells us, "During my first year, I felt I was being punished for simply not knowing what to do. No new teacher should feel so alone with her mistakes." In that setting, teachers hid what they did not know, and, of course, could not work together to learn what they needed to learn. The shaming isolation that such an atmosphere encourages makes it impossible to develop a clear picture of oneself as a teacher. Later, a truer mirror was held up for Huffman, when the feedback of a wise mentor showed her how much she already knew about teaching, and how she could continue to develop her skills. And this connectedness develops between children and teachers, as well. When Marika Paez describes her work with her children, she shows us how she was "forced to trust the children and to rely on them as partners, trying to figure out how to resolve the situation." What began as a "last resort" became an understanding that is now central to her teaching.

One more aspect of teaching: generosity. I am often touched by the willingness of teachers to share whatever they have learned from their own journeys, to tell their stories as a way of keeping us all afloat. Elizabeth Huffman's mentor told her that "teaching is an act of hope." In these articles we find courage, resourcefulness, insight, and inspiration. We are reminded, in the words of that visiting K/1 teacher, not to give up on ourselves.